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ABSTRACT

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# Instructional Differentiation and the Institutionalization of Student Activity in the Classroom

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Instructional Differentiation and the

Institutionalization of Student Activity in the Classroom

Kenneth E. Duckworth

## ABSTRACT

Social control in the elementary school classroom is viewed from the perspective of the institutionalization of norms. Berger and Luckmann (1966) propose that one study the shared knowledge about social reality underlying norms. This research attempted to determine how the complex classroom ecology of differentiated (especially individualized) instruction affects (1) the ways teachers communicate knowledge about work procedures, deviance boundaries, and work values and (2) teachers' perceptions of student orientation to such knowledge. Findings from a survey of 237 elementary school teachers showed that the higher the level of instructional differentiation, the less the use of formal communication, the more the use of written communication, and the higher the level of student orientation reported by the teacher. Supplementary classroom observations, however, suggested caution in interpreting the last finding. It is argued that teachers' engagement in intensive individual tutorial in highly-differentiated classrooms diverts their attention away from off-task behavior among other students. Hence, under such conditions the absence of social control "problems" may not indicate a highly-institutionalized classroom. This implies possible difficulties in legitimating the social world of individualized classrooms to the larger community.

In this paper, I report some initial findings from a study which attempted to research the problem of classroom social control from the perspective of the socialization of children into the role of "student". There is a long tradition of research on classroom social control as "discipline" which reaches an interesting turning point, in my view, in Kounin's recent book, Discipline and Group Management in Classrooms (1970). Kounin's discussion begins by criticizing his own earlier research for focusing too narrowly on teacher disciplinary techniques. He compares the inconclusive findings of his original studies with the more promising findings of his subsequent investigations of broader patterns of classroom management, including teachers' ways of organizing and supervising instructional work sessions. He concludes that

> "the business of running a classroom is a complicated technology having to do with developing a nonsatiating learning program; programming for progress, challenge, and variety in learning activities; initiating and maintaining movement in classroom tasks with smoothness and momentum; coping with more than one event simultaneously; observing and emitting feedback for many different events; directing actions at appropriate targets; maintaining a focus upon a group; and doubtless other techniques not measured in these researches." (p. 145)

The comprehensiveness of this list is impressive, but its diversity is somewhat daunting. While reading Kounin, I had been struck by a simpler theme: that the prevention of disciplinary problems is a function of the students' orientation to the teacher's instructional program. The task of maintaining such orientation seemed to me a task of creating and sustaining classroom norms.

My interest in classroom norms was shaped by reading Durkheim's Moral Education (1925; English translation, 1961), in which the author stresses the importance of classroom moral codes for the child's development of a sense of the larger morality representing society, and Dreeben's On What

Is Learned in School (1968), in which the author emphasizes the importance of normative outcomes of schooling for the socialization of children for adult occupational roles. With regard to the creation of moral codes and the production of normative outcomes, however, I found Durkheim's advocacy of personal exhortation and example by the teacher unconvincing and Dreeben's account of global structural features of schooling insufficiently specific.

I was more attracted to Waller's description of "institutionalized" leadership in The Sociology of Teaching (1932). Waller argued that impersonal patterns of classroom activity, governing the behavior of teacher and student alike, were set up and bounded by clearly communicated distinctions between routine and unusual classroom events and between appropriate and inappropriate behavior. The aspect of this description which intrigued me most was the notion that teachers and students rely upon common knowledge about regular features of the classroom in coordinating their interaction. In other words, conformity to classroom norms presupposes knowledge of the norms, which in turn requires the categorization of classroom life itself.

The study of classroom norms would seem to benefit therefore from the study of what Berger and Luckmann call The Social Construction of Reality (1966). Categories of classroom activity become "real" as teachers "typify" or give recognizable sense to their own and students' actions and as students "reciprocate" or use these typifications in interpreting classroom events. This congruence in teacher and student knowledge of classroom activity is what Berger and Luckmann would call the "institutionalization" of the classroom.

I attempted to make discussion of institutionalization more manageable by focusing on three central kinds of knowledge used to interpret classroom activity and by restricting my attention to the classroom as a workplace. The three kinds of knowledge are work procedures (routine activity or "what

usually is done"), deviance boundaries (forbidden territory or "what is not done"), and work values (promised lands or "what good things might happen"). The institutional variables I chose to study were ways in which teachers communicated knowledge of work procedures, deviance boundaries, and work values to students and the degree of effectiveness of such knowledge in orienting students' attention to daily classroom activity. My question for research was how the institutionalization of classroom work changes with the ecology of classroom work, particularly the complexity of this ecology wrought by contemporary efforts to differentiate instruction so as to improve the match between instructional treatment and student need.

To answer this question, I used two sources of information. First, I had data from a survey conducted in the San Francisco Bay Area in Spring, 1975, of a sample of 237 elementary school teachers of all grades in 33 schools selected to obtain a wide range in complexity of instructional programs. The survey was part of a larger study of elementary school organization conducted by the Environment for Teaching Program at the Stanford Center for Research and Development in Teaching. In addition to the teacher survey responses, I had informal notes I had taken during observations of a small number of third- and fourth-grade reading classes I had visited for a week each. I undertook this classroom observation because of misgivings about relying wholly on teacher perceptions; unfortunately it was not possible to obtain systematic observational data or survey data on students' perceptions within the research schedule. I will use the informal observational data to help interpret the teacher survey findings.

I will discuss the survey findings first. The survey questionnaire included several items which were relevant to teachers' practices in communicating knowledge of institutional categories. I decided to focus on formal and written communication. With regard to formal communication, measures were as follows:

> Work procedures: the number of rules about classwork procedures the teacher had established in her classroom.
>
> Deviance boundaries: the number of rules about student conduct the teacher had established in her classroom.
>
> Work values: a composite index of (a) the frequency with which teachers marked student work and the amounts of emphasis that teachers gave (b) objective tests and (c) quizzes in evaluating student work.

With regard to written communication of knowledge, the measures available focused on work procedures alone. These were teachers' reports of how frequently they required students to follow written directions for work by themselves and how extensively they used student contracts and programmed materials.

I measured the levels of student orientation to knowledge of work procedures, deviance boundaries, and work values rather indirectly. Teachers were asked how frequently students had problems understanding or remembering work procedures, how difficult the class had been to control, and how frequently they had felt that students weren't trying to work "up to their potential." In short, I obtained negative measures of institutional effectiveness or student orientation. To simplify the presentation of results and the discussion of findings, I reversed these measures during analysis to provide indicators of understanding of procedures, ease of control, and level of student effort.

Two measures of instructional differentiation were obtained from the survey questionnaire. The first measure was the degree of segmentation of the class during typical work periods. Teachers were asked whether they used whole-class organization, 2 or 3 groups, 4 or more groups, or individualized arrangements. The second measure was the variety of materials in use at any one time. Again, teachers indicated that either all students used the same materials, 2 or 3 different sets were in use, 4 or more different sets were in use, or each student used separate materials. These two measures were highly inter-correlated (.70***) and so were combined into a composite index of "differentiation".

I argued that teachers "high" on differentiation would make less use of formal communication, and more use of written communication, than teachers "low" on differentiation. My reasoning was that it would be difficult to standardize rules and formal evaluation for students working separately on different tasks--and perhaps difficult even to communicate knowledge about institutions to all the students at one time. Hence, teachers would have to rely more on written instructions which could be provided beforehand to students. Table 1* shows the findings pertinent to this hypothesis. Table 1 shows that teachers higher on the differentiation index report fewer rules about student conduct and less use of formal evaluation than teachers lower on the differentiation index. Teachers who differentiate instruction also report fewer rules about procedures, but this result ($r = -.06$) is not statistically significant. The findings also show that teachers high on the differentiation index are more likely to require students to follow detailed written instructions and are more likely to use

* Tables begin on page 15.

student contracts. The level of instructional differentiation does not appear to be related (r = .04) to the use of programmed materials. In general, however, the findings in Table 1 provide support for my hypothesis that the communication of knowledge which typifies student activity would be accomplished in different ways depending on the level of instructional differentiation.

In addition to differences in the communication of knowledge, I also expected differences in the level of student orientation to this knowledge and, thus, in the institutional effectiveness of knowledge about work procedures, deviance boundaries, and work values between differentiated and undifferentiated classrooms. I predicted that the level of instructional differentiation would be negatively related to measures of institutional effectiveness. The results are shown in Table 2. The Pearson correlation coefficients in Table 2 are not consistent with this hypothesis. They indicate that the more differentiation teachers report, the higher the levels of student procedural understanding control and effort they report. However, all the relationships are weak, and only the finding about ease of control is statistically significant. I found these positive relationships so surprising that I wanted more specific information about the distribution of responses on institutional effectiveness within each category of differentiation. To simplify the presentation of these data, I used a composite measure of institutional effectiveness derived from a combination of the measures of understanding of procedures, ease of control, and level of student effort, which are markedly inter-correlated as shown in Table 3. This composite measure was signficantly related to differentiation (r = .15*). In order to make the

categories of instructional differentiation meaningful, I selected only those teachers who consistently reported either a "traditional" classroom (whole-class or 2 to 3 groups), a "moderately differentiated" classroom (4 or more groups), or an "individualized" classroom on both the component measures of segmentation and materials variation. These restricted categories included 138 teachers; teachers who responded differently on the two component measures were excluded. The cross-tabulation of these differentiation categories with the composite measure of institutional effectiveness (trichotomized into High, Medium, and Low effectiveness) is shown in Table 4. Table 4 shows that 49% of the teachers reporting individualized instruction reported high institutional effectiveness, compared to only 32% of the "moderately differentiated" teachers and 30% of the "traditional" teachers. Similarly, only 32% of the "individualized" teachers reported low institutional effectiveness, whereas 45% of the "moderately differentiated" teachers and 43% of the "traditional" teachers reported low institutional effectiveness. These results suggest a non-linear relationship between instructional differentiation and institutional effectiveness. Individualization, rather than mere differentiation of instruction seems to be the source of the positive correlation in Table 2.

The literal interpretation of this finding that something about individualized classrooms is productive of effective classroom institutions, was hard at first to reconcile with impressions formed from immediate experience.

During the classroom observations, which had been undertaken as an informal supplement to the survey of teachers, I had good opportunities

to compare "traditional" and "individualized" instruction. Three of the teachers I observed ran rather "traditional" classrooms--either common activities for all students or students organized into two ability groups. Three other teachers had students work individually, not exactly on unique tasks but on so great a variety of tasks as to present a very complex situation for classroom management.

My initial impressions had been that the traditional classrooms exhibited much more student on-task behavior than the individualized classrooms. In the individualized rooms, an initial period of calm following the formal beginning of the reading period soon gave way to a rising tide of noise and movement. Some of this noise and movement was work-related, but much reminded me of recess, especially in the fluidity with which student activity streamed out of the room at the official recess time. In the "traditional" classes, I noticed this sort of low orientation to classwork only when the teacher was working with one sub-group. The other group, a temporary "out-group", exhibited the same growing restlessness. Based on these comparisons, I had expected my prediction about the reduction of institutional effectiveness in differentiated classrooms to be supported by the survey data.

Faced with the contradiction of this prediction, I immediately looked for a methodological escape clause. Perhaps the fault lay in the attempt to infer a causal relationship from cross-sectional data. Might not the positive relationship between instructional differentiation and institutional effectiveness really indicate that teachers whose students present problems of orientation to classroom institutions simply abandon

individualized instruction over the course of the school year? Although I doubt that teachers have quite this flexibility with regard to instructional differentiation, which often involves fixed commitments to a set of materials, it would be worthwhile to re-examine Table 4 from the opposite causal perspective. Table 5 therefore shows the same array of actual responses, but the accompanying percentages indicate the proportion of teachers in each category of level of institutional effectiveness reporting individualized, moderately differentiated, and traditional instruction. If ineffective institutions were causing a retreat from individualization, I would expect that teachers whose students were posing serious problems would withdraw to simpler modes of instruction. Table 5 shows, on the contrary, that teachers reporting low institutional effectiveness do not differ significantly from teachers reporting "medium" institutional effectiveness in their tendency to individualize. It is the teachers who report "high" institutional effectivenss who diverge from the others. Fully 40% of those teachers reporting highly effective institutions also individualize instruction, whereas only 25% and 23%, respectively, of the teachers reporting medium and low effectiveness employ individualized instruction. Similarly, only 26% of the "high" teachers use traditional instructional patterns, compared to 38% and 34%, respectively, of the "medium" and "low" teachers.

This pattern seems to me to argue against the reversal of causal perspective in this case. There is no cogent argument why teachers whose students are very docile should choose to individualize. As a consequence of the comparison of Tables 4 and 5, I prefer to maintain the original

notion that instructional differentiation has effects on classroom institutions rather than the other way around (although a subtler investigation would doubtless find some reverse effects also).

Lacking this convenient methodological explanation, I was forced to investigate data further. Remembering that the survey data reflected teachers' perceptions, I reviewed my observation notes and tried to locate the teacher in the overall pattern of classroom interaction and imagine what the scene looked like to her. What appeared was the contrast between the teacher's interaction with students in a group and her interaction with students as individuals. Teachers seemed to complain about student problems with respect to work procedures, deviance boundaries, and work values more frequently while leading a group than while tutoring individual students. Moreover, this was true in both traditional and individualized classrooms. Perhaps, then, the pattern of interaction affected teachers' perceptions of student orientation. I was able to identify episodes with similar patterns of interaction across "traditional" and "individualized" classrooms. For example, two of the individualized classrooms exhibited daily group leadership episodes. In one case, each reading period began with a 15-minute "basic skills" session, in which the teacher led all the students through dittoed exercise sheets. Typical comments during this session were:

(1) "Louie, you need to be listening; this is class time--contract time will come after this." (procedure)

(2) "Some people are not in their seats." (deviance)

This situation was really no different from the traditional teacher's attempt to carry on a reading lesson with one of her ability groups.

What became apparent to me is that leading a group of students floods the teacher with evidence regarding student orientation. Insofar as the group leadership situation is more common in traditional classrooms than in individualized classrooms, this might explain why traditional teachers are less sanguine about institutional effectiveness.

One-to-one teacher-student interaction varied more between "traditional" and "individualized" classrooms. Tutorial interaction is quite common in traditional classrooms in the form of students queuing up at the teacher's desk to get help on work assignments. In these instances, however, the one-to-one interaction is usually very brief, very routine, and focused on a specific problem the student is having. Teachers are not totally absorbed in dealing with the students and are easily able to scan the rest of the class with regard to off-task behavior. I frequently heard remarks like, "Tom, would you bring your workbook up here, please. . . How many sentences have you finished?". In the individualized classrooms, however, individual tutorial was more intensive. Often, the teacher would spend as much as 15 minutes working with a student, going over the previous week's work. In other cases, the teacher would spend most of the period in a series of conferences with students who had finished work contracts. These interactions would be prolonged, personalized, and comprehensive. Teachers could not easily break out of this degree of engagement to monitor the rest of the class. Teacher complaints about student orientation problems under such circumstances were usually limited to sharp commands that certain students stop making so much noise. A striking difference was that although far more students were "not in their seats," this was seldom remarked by the teacher.

There are two things to be observed about such intensive tutorial interactions. First, as indicated above, the teacher has little access to evidence concerning student orientation in the class at large. Second, the teacher does have access in depth to individual students' orientation, but this appears in a context where the teacher has unquestioned personal control of the interaction. Thus, I suspect that teachers are less likely to perceive problems which arise in tutorial interaction as evidence of the general ineffectiveness of classroom institutions.

I was curious to find out how much these differences in teacher-student interaction were generalizable to the larger survey sample. Unfortunately, I have no measure of the proportion of class time devoted to group leadership. With regard to individual interaction, however, there are a few measures which do parallel the distinction I have made between routine and intensive interaction. Teachers were asked, "On the average how often do you talk to each of your students, individually or in small groups, about [among other things] the goals or progress of their work and specific skill needs of the students in reading?" This sort of interaction is possible within the routine "helping" that goes on in traditional classrooms. Teachers were also asked how often they talked to students "about mutual planning of the activities students will pursue in reading" and to what extent teachers used "systematic student conferences in reading?" I would expect this sort of interaction to require more intensive contact with individual students. The relationship of these measures of differentiation is shown in Table 6. As Table 6 shows, the higher the level of differentiation teachers report, the more individual interaction of all sorts they report,

but only the intensive interaction measures are significantly related to differentiation. Therefore, intensive interaction, to the degree that it focuses the teacher's attention away from the class as a whole and on one or a few students at a time, may be an important factor in the tendency of individualizing teachers to report high levels of institutional effectiveness.

The implications of these findings for the original question--how the institutionalization of student activity in the classroom changes with a greater level of instructional differentiation--are ambiguous. My impression is that the role of "student" itself changes. Whereas in minimally- and undifferentiated classrooms (i.e., those with at most 3 sub-groups) the student role is embedded in common activities typified with reference to formal prescriptions, in highly-differentiated classrooms the student role attains a high degree of socially-constructed "reality" primarily during one-to-one student-teacher interaction. There is, to be sure, an increased availability of recorded (i.e., written) information about work procedures, but children seem to have some freedom in choosing between attention to this information and attention to other action opportunities--especially with the peer group--on a moment-to-moment basis.

The survey data indicate that teachers in individualized classrooms are more content with the level of student orientation than are other teachers. If this means that individualizing teachers are satisfied with evidence of student orientation during personal interaction and are willing to tolerate large areas of classroom activity that appear unaffected by teacher typifications, then perhaps we should rejoice for the apparent viability of an instructional innovation many have claimed to be unmanageable. I would be cautious

about the long-range prognosis, however. It may be that individualizing teachers do solve their social control problems by shifting their focus of attention away from the class as a whole and onto individual students with whom they work at any one moment. Whether outsiders will be willing to accept this reduced role of student to which children are socialized is another question. This writer, as such an outsider, found it difficult to observe individualized classrooms with equanimity about their socialization outcomes. Durkheim and Dreeben write as spokesmen for those parts of society which either have vested interests (as members of the existing adult establishment) or personal concerns (as parents worried about their children's capacity to cope with adult social institutions) in the socialization of children for more impersonal roles governed by formalized knowledge. These constituencies may ultimately reject the sort of institutional world one finds in individualized classrooms. Already, there are signs of demand for "alternative traditional" classrooms.

My personal opinion is that the viability of the institutional world of the individualized classroom will depend upon its success in exhibiting evidence of voluntary student orientation to institutional categories of work procedures, deviance boundaries, and work values. The paradox of individualized instruction is that teachers simultaneously rely on personalized, intensive ways of communicating knowledge and complain about excessive student dependence. Only where teachers are successful in getting students to maintain their attention (e.g., "take initiative in solving problems and moving from one task to the next" in one teacher's words) to classwork without continual teacher contact will individualizing teachers be able to legitimate their practice in terms of socialization outcomes acceptable to the larger society.

Table 1. Relationship of Instructional Differentiation Index to Measures of Formal Communication and Written Communication

| Formal Communication | Instructional Differentiation | Written Communication | Instructional Differentiation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Rules about procedures | -.06 | Written instructions | .11* |
| Rules about conduct | -.14* | Student contracts | .20** |
| Formal evaluation | -.13* | Programmed materials | .04 |

n = 237

Table 2. Relationship of Instructional Differentiation Index to Measures of Institutional Effectiveness

| Knowledge Category | Measures of Institutional Effectiveness | Relationship to Instructional Differentiation Index |
|---|---|---|
| Work procedures | Understanding of procedures | .11[a] |
| Deviance boundaries | Ease of control | .13* |
| Work values | Level of student effort | .10 |

a: p = .06 n = 237

Table 3. Relationship Among Different Measures of Institutional Effectiveness (n = 237)

| | Student Understanding of Procedures | Ease of Student Control | Level of Student Effort |
|---|---|---|---|
| Student understanding of procedures | -- | .23*** | .45*** |
| Ease of student control | | -- | .47*** |
| Level of student effort | | | -- |

NOTE: Statistical Significance Key:

* p = .05;

** p = .01;

*** p = .001

Table 4. Distribution of Responses on Institutional Effectiveness for Each Category of Instructional Differentiation (n = 138). Shown are both actual number of responses and percentage of total responses in each category of instructional differentiation.

| Instructional Differentiation | Institutional Effectiveness: High | Medium | Low | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Individualized | 20 (49%) | 8 (20%) | 13 (32%) | 41 (100%) |
| Moderately Differentiated | 17 (32%) | 12 (23%) | 24 (45%) | 53 (100%) |
| Traditional | 13 (30%) | 12 (27%) | 19 (43%) | 44 (100%) |

Table 5. Distribution of Responses on Instructional Differentiation for Each Level of Institutional Effectiveness. (n = 138). Numbers in parentheses indicate proportion of total responses in each category of institutional effectiveness.

| Institutional Effectiveness | Instructional Differentiation: Individualized | Moderately Differentiated | Traditional | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| High | 20 (40%) | 17 (34%) | 13 (26%) | 50 (100%) |
| Medium | 8 (25%) | 12 (38%) | 12 (38%) | 32 (100%) |
| Low | 13 (23%) | 24 (43%) | 19 (34%) | 56 (100%) |

(NOTE: The composite index of institutional effectiveness was trichotomized on the whole sample of 237 teachers; the unequal distribution of responses across "high", "medium", and "low" categories shown here is a result of reducing the sample to the 138 teachers who responded consistently on both of the component measures of differentiation.)

Table 6. Relationships of Routine and Intensive Interaction Measures to Instructional Differentiation. n = 237

| | Instructional Differentiation |
|---|---|
| **Routine Interaction** | |
| Goals, progress of work | .10 |
| Specific skill needs | .10 |
| **Intensive Interaction** | |
| Mutual planning of work | .15* |
| Systematic conferences | .40*** |

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